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News

Bar Raised for Athletic Eligibility

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The National Collegiate Athletic Association's announcement Thursday that it will require Division I teams to have at least half athletes on track for graduation in order to be eligible for postseason play jolted some observers -- not least because the decision came out of a [retreat for Division I college presidents](#) that ended just the day before, making for an incredibly quick turnaround in NCAA standards.

But a concurrent announcement, albeit a less concrete one, could have even greater significance.

As part of its attempt to improve the academic integrity of college athletics, the NCAA will raise academic eligibility standards for incoming freshmen and transfer students in Division I -- and one outcome could be a strengthening of the NCAA's use of standardized test scores for determining academic eligibility, which was eased nearly a decade ago.

Given that the NCAA is raising its expectations for the students who are already playing college sports -- teams that fall below postseason eligibility benchmark, a (newly raised) 930 average Academic Progress Rate over four years, will also be subject to financial penalties -- it only makes sense that colleges admit students who are academically capable of meeting those standards once in college, said Amy Perko, executive director of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

"The bottom line is that the initial standards need to be stronger because it's not fair to the athletes who are not prepared to do college-level work, and it's not good for college sports for those policies not to be in place," Perko said. "The postseason championship requirement is a commitment to the academic success, to show that academic value is a priority. Looking at the standards to make sure they're consistent with the outcome that's achieved is why the eligibility rules need to be an area in which action is taken."

In a call with reporters Thursday, Division I leaders focused mostly on the new APR requirement. But, as NCAA President Mark Emmert said, they also want to examine the current eligibility requirements and consider how they could be changed. "All of the presidents and I agree that we need to have much more robust initial eligibility standards," he said.

What form the new rules could take hasn't been specified yet; besides taking a fresh look at the sliding test scores scale (more that below), the presidents could also require incoming athletes to meet higher minimum grade point averages in high school or complete a more robust core curriculum that's completed throughout high school, not just shoved in during senior year. The Division I Board of Directors won't consider proposals on initial eligibility standards until one of its upcoming meetings in October or January. But the SAT requirement, which is [still a divisive topic](#) in higher education, could be particularly controversial because of its long background. (At the October meeting the board will consider how quickly to enforce the new rules on the Academic Progress Rate.) Walter Harrison, president of the University of Hartford and chair of the NCAA's Committee on Academic Performance, said he expects the phase-in will take three to five years.)

The NCAA's eligibility requirements for freshmen have long featured a sliding scale, whereby a student could make up for low or ACT scores with a higher GPA -- but still had to achieve a minimum score on the test. But after a group of black athletes sue NCAA in 1997, alleging that the rule was discriminatory because minority students typically score lower on the SAT, the association approved academic reform legislation in 2003 that dropped the minimum requirement, created the APR system, and left [the sliding scale](#) intact. (That's despite the fact that the NCAA appealed the court's initial ruling and ultimately won the lawsuit. The NCAA maintained that the case was not the driver of the rules change).

So now, athletes can theoretically bomb the SAT but still be eligible with a high-enough GPA in their 16 core high school math, science, English and elective courses.

Gerald S. Gurney, senior associate director for academics and student life at the University of Oklahoma, [has condemned the change](#) for all sorts of reasons: it is probably linked to [increased academic fraud](#); four-year institutions are not well-equipped to provide remedial education; and poor-performing students are shuffled through less-rigorous programs such as general studies, he says.

[Opponents of overdependence on test scores argue](#) that an SAT minimum effectively shuts out the students who may not do well but have the potential to ultimately succeed in college -- students who often [come from low-income backgrounds](#). But Chris C. Perko, who is also the immediate past-president of the National Association of Academic Advisers for Athletics, says that's not the point.

"The real question is not about race and cultural bias. The real question, are these student athletes academically prepared to compete in a college classroom?" Gurney said, noting that his own research has found that students at one Bowl Championship Series institution who scored very low on the ACT also had significantly lower learning skills because they had difficulty reading. He also mentioned that the growing problem of grade inflation makes high school GPA a dubious indicator of college preparedness, he said.

"It's far easier to gain initial eligibility today than since 2003. So I definitely feel that it is important to set a minimum test score standard, along with higher GPAs. Do I think that will ever happen, or at least in this edition of academic reform? No, I don't. I think what they're more likely to do is raise high school GPA regulations."

Perko didn't take as firm a stance on the SAT question, but noted that the NCAA's own tracking of athletes' academic performance from entry to exit -- speaks for itself.

"The data show that we're not getting the academic outcomes that are desired," she said. "The fact that they're looking at enhancing the initial eligibility requirements is an acknowledgment that the changes that were made have weakened, obviously, the academic profiles of the athletes who are currently participating."

An SAT minimum, Perko said, "definitely needs to be on the table."

— [Allie Grasgreen](#)